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ABSTRACT

This National Council for History Education (NCHE) Occasional Paper presents the text of a speech given by Roger Mudd, a former network news correspondent and now a correspondent for the History Channel, to NCHE members. He spoke of his regard for the profession of teaching, and of the difficulty of being a teacher and the respect for teachers that is missing in U.S. society. Mudd told some personal stories from his professional life, and since it was just a few days before the 2000 presidential election, he mused about people's expectations and convictions about every new president who takes office. He discussed the results of the testing programs for public school students, mentioning that in his state of Virginia it was the high school test on United States history that most of the students flunked. Mudd also talked about National History Day and related some anecdotes about U.S. presidents from earlier times. He concluded with some personal opinions about how history is currently taught, and how television was not much help until Ken Burns' 1990 PBS series, "The Civil War." Roger Mudd ended his speech with a humorous anecdote about having the surname Mudd. (BT)

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NCHE
National Council for History Education

Occasional Paper

December, 2000

HISTORY AND TEACHERS MATTER

by Roger Mudd
The History Channel
Speech delivered at the History Matters Conference
October 28, 2000 • Sacramento, California

Good morning. I'm delighted to be here. When Ted Rabb first invited me to speak on your tenth anniversary, I asked him if there was anything I needed to prepare special for this morning, did I need to get informed about any problems facing the NCHE, and Ted said no, no, no...just be yourself. You don't have to be informed about anything. (laughter)

So it's always a pleasure for me to be anywhere with teachers, especially history teachers, not only because I love history, but I love teachers. Ten years ago I did for PBS a documentary series called *Learning in America*. And with your permission, I would like to quote from what I wrote at the end of the final program. "What else is needed is something the teachers themselves are reluctant to talk about openly and it's our respect for them. It's what's missing in America, and it's what's been too long withheld from a profession so important to our national well being, as important as doctors or captains of industry or TV commentators. From sunup to sundown, the school teachers you have seen tonight work harder than you do—no matter what you do. No calling in our society is more demanding than teaching. No calling in our society is more selfless than teaching. No calling in our society is more central to the vitality of a democracy than teaching."

Roger Mudd

Those words I believed then and I believe now, and I'm delighted to be here so that I could tell you that in person.

Now, just a week from Tuesday, we'll all be off to the polls, some of us even believing that life will be wondrous with our new president, be he Albert Gore, Jr. or George W. Bush.

Back in the seventies, we were convinced that Jerry Ford would be great because he was open and unaffected and natural in ways that Richard Nixon was not. We were convinced that Jimmy Carter would be great because he was competent and smart and new to Washington in ways that Jerry Ford was not. We believed that Ronald Reagan would be great because he was relaxed and secure and could communicate in ways that Jimmy Carter could not. George Bush would be great because he loved the details of government, and Ronald Reagan did not. And, finally, Bill Clinton would be great because he had the common touch and connected with people in ways that George (laughter) Bush did not.

The nation sees these men as bigger than life because they are exalted by their spin doctors and glorified by the media. But after a year or two or three, the old problems begin to return, popping through the press releases in the glowing White House briefing papers, and the public begins to notice that life is about the same. Look what's happened to our presidents as they struggle to survive under an avalanche of expectations. Lyndon Johnson came in to save us from Barry Goldwater's atomic bomb, and he left office as a baby killer. Jerry Ford came in to end our long Watergate nightmare and left bumping his head on a helicopter door. Jimmy Carter came in carrying his own garment bag and left close to being the presidential laughing stock. Ronald Reagan came in ebullient and upbeat, but left not able to explain Iran-contra the same way twice. George Bush arrived engaged and immersed, but left out of touch and out of gas. Bill Clinton was sworn in as the astute policy wonk, but will be leaving as an unindicted perjurer and our second president to be impeached.

I recite this recent chapter in presidential history because I think the media should back off and allow our newly-inaugurated presidents to find their sea legs, assemble their government, establish their priorities and go about trying to fulfill at least a few of the promises that they've made us. Then if we give them a fighting chance, perhaps the voters will not expect so much of them and will not become so disillusioned with them in the end.

I didn't mean to get so far off into politics, but it's not possible to talk to a group of history teachers without talking politics, especially this year when both candidates are breaking a sweat over the education issue. Albert Gore has promised, and I'm quoting from his speech in May in Lansing, Michigan, that "there will be a fully-qualified, well-trained teacher in every single classroom in this nation by the end of the next four years." To do

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that, he says he needs sixteen billion dollars over the next ten years. But to do it with federal money, Gore would have to take the federal government where it's never been before—into the licensing of teachers. George Bush would not go there. He wants to raise three billion dollars over five years to recruit and train teachers and get the retired military into the classroom, but he would not set license or professional standards. He would use a mix of local, state and federal money to give about four hundred thousand teachers in high poverty districts an extra five thousand dollars. One plan to me sounds like a risky scheme, the other kind of fuzzy. So, don't hold your breath on either plan.

In my own state of Virginia, education has become a major issue in the Senate race between the incumbent Democrat Charles Robb and the former governor Republican George Allen. It was Allen who initiated the standards of learning testing program in 1998 as a tool to improve student performance and public school accountability. Senator Robb charges that too many of Virginia's teachers feel they are required to teach to the test, fearing the professional consequences to themselves and their school if the students fail. Robb claims that the tests have created an atmosphere of anxiety. Allen says the anxiety is caused by high school graduates having to take remedial courses in college. Robb says the SOL's are all stick and no carrot. Allen says the carrot is a high-quality education you can't get anywhere else in the country. Of course, what's so disturbing is that, of the twenty-seven SOL tests covering various subjects and various grade levels, it was the high school test on U.S. history that most of the students in Virginia flunked. A passing grade was only sixty-six.

Such questions as: *The American colonists who opposed separation from Britain were known as: Sons of Liberty, Minutemen, Tories, or Patriots?* And, *Which practice in schools did Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 eliminate? Affirmative action, busing to achieve integration, legal segregation in the public schools, censorship of school newspapers?*

Sixty-one percent of the students flunked such questions, and no one seems to know why. Politicians blame the superintendents for low test scores; the superintendents hold the principals accountable; principals put pressure on the teachers. A few teachers succumb to the pressure and help their students cheat, and now the citizenry is blaming the teachers, the tests, the school boards, and the politicians. One county superintendent in Virginia says the U.S. history test should be suspended until the state figures out what's wrong. Some teachers think open-ended essay questions should be added. Others think focusing on facts and dates is not the best way to teach history. Whoever or whatever is to blame, it's obvious that much of the knowledge, understanding and inspiration of and from our past is being lost on our children.

Everyone in this room no doubt has read, back in June, the results of a survey by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni of senior students at fifty-five of the country's top colleges, from Amherst to Vanderbilt. They were given a high-school-level history test with such questions as: *Who was the father of the Constitution? Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison*. And, *Who was the president at the beginning of the Korean War? JFK, FDR, Eisenhower, or Truman*. And, *Identify Snoop Doggie Dog. A Charles Schulz cartoon, a mystery series, a rap singer, or a jazz pianist?* Guess what? Twenty-three percent knew Madison was the father of the Constitution, thirty-five percent tied Truman to the Korean War. Ninety-eight percent knew Snoop Doggie Dog. And if you don't believe that, maybe you would believe that the Council's survey also discovered that not one—not one—of America's top fifty-five universities and colleges requires its students to take a course in U.S. history before graduation. Not one. Only twenty-three of the fifty-five require a course of some sort, any sort of history. So, is it any wonder?

I for one believe that there is more, much more to history than dates and bits and pieces of data; that life is not a multiple choice, but is more like an essay. I think reasoning and analytical skills are just as important as encyclopedic knowledge. But neither do I think we should be afraid of facts and dates or hesitate to require our young people to develop some muscle memory about who the people were who shaped this country and when it was they shaped it.

It is true that test scores can be misleading and can be used to denigrate an entire school system. I regard myself as a reasonably well-educated man, a product of the public school system and the private university system. But not for the life of me could I answer some of those questions that George W. Bush flunked last spring. The prime minister of Sri Lanka, the president of Indonesia, the defense minister of Canada. I have not a clue. I don't think Americans are uniquely uninformed. Several years ago a survey by the Gallup people and the Daily Telegraph in London found that only forty percent of those polled in London knew that Britain had lost the American war for independence. (laughter) Takes them a long time to face the facts, doesn't it? Fifty-three percent thought the thirteen American colonies were never under British rule.

Will Rogers once said that everybody is ignorant, only on different subjects. I don't think Americans are an ignorant nationality. But, I do think we are prone to intellectual lassitude. I think the tendency has not been helped by the cultural pervasiveness of television and the Internet. I think we demand instant gratification, and I think we are suckers for quick and easy solutions which, I suggest, is what accounts for the widespread belief that all it takes to solve our education crisis is some

standard of learning test, some teacher certifications, some school accountability. I think learning is hard, and I think it requires discipline. But that doesn't mean it can't be stimulating or even breathtaking. All of you must know, because I've heard you talk about it, that one of the most exciting innovations in the teaching of history is National History Day, involving more than six hundred thousand middle school and high school students across the country, going beyond their textbooks to the museums and the libraries and the archives to do original research projects. Each June at the University of Maryland come two thousand finalists to College Park to display their work. Leslie Bennett, a fifteen-year-old student at the Lab School in Washington, put together a multimedia documentary on D-Day, and he said it changed his life. "I got the confidence that I could do this kind of work, and my grades went up in everything." Fifteen-year-old Paul Matthews, who is a dyslectic, said that his documentary on George Washington Carver was hard, but he said, "I wanted to do it and I set my mind to it. I thought if I don't do it at any other time in my entire life, at least I've done it once." So, there is a way, and it can be done.

I must tell you that it's hard to grow up in the Mudd family without learning to be comfortable with words and with grammar, without loving good writing and without having a strong grip on our history. Somewhere along the line, some friends of ours gave our family a set of presidential miniatures, little plastic figures, two or three inches high. All the presidents, from Washington up to Kennedy. And, from time to time, we bring them out on the kitchen table and mix them all up when the grandchildren come over. Christopher and Harrison, and Caitlin and Madeleine and Emma, Bridget and Sarah, John Thomas, Will, Nelson. One day Christopher and Harrison were with us, and I took out the set, and we went through them from top to bottom. And I would point out something about each president I thought would be interesting. That Washington was a great horseman, and that Jefferson had red hair, and that Madison was five feet four and his nickname was Jamie, and that VanBuren was a dandy and so forth. And, because my wife was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia, she made sure that the boys knew that it was Ulysses S. Grant who was responsible for the burning of Richmond. And that it was Ulysses S. Grant who really had a corrupt administration. So, I would take these little figures and mix them all up on the table, and then Christopher and Harrison would have to arrange them in chronological order against the clock. (laughter) Well, in about fifteen minutes, they had them all in perfect order. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison. All the way up to Andrew Johnson. Grant was missing. (laughter) Where was Grant? I asked Christopher. He pointed to Harrison. I asked Harrison. Harrison remained mute. I began to look for Grant, around the table. I finally found him on the floor behind one of the table legs. "Harrison, what's President Grant doing down there on the floor?" There's no answer. "Harrison, answer my question." Another long pause and he finally said, "He's in Hell." (laughter)

Colonel Roger King, who's working on the Pentagon's fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War, says that we've found that history teachers are spending just a day or two on World War II. "It's really kind of sad" he said "because it's the pivotal event of the century." "It's fallen off," he says, "it's fallen off the education scope." How could that have happened if it has happened? Could it be that American school teachers have in fact relegated World War II to one day? Having taught eleventh and twelfth grade U.S. history myself years ago in a boys school, I suspect that this might be true. I can remember trying my best to cover the ground from Aztecs to the Atomic Bomb. But, this being a school in Georgia, spending too much time on the Civil War and then running out of gas trying to get to Pearl Harbor or D-Day, and remembering how incredulous I was to learn that my students had no idea who Mussolini was. The year was 1951, and Mussolini hadn't been dead but six years. But then realizing that, when Mussolini had been shot in April 1945 and then strung up in the Piazza Loreto in Milan, my students were only ten or twelve years old. And then rationalizing that recent history wasn't really history but more current events, and hoping that my boys who had been taught by me to be curious and to ask questions would take it upon themselves to find out about Mussolini.

...neither do I think we should be afraid of facts and dates or hesitate to require our young people to develop some muscle memory about who the people were who shaped this country and when it was they shaped it.

So, I think the teaching of recent history suffers from some of that, but it also suffers because I think less and less history gets taught as history. It gets taught as social studies with history being sliced into little pieces: labor history, gender history, folk history, black history, gay history, and sports history. And the teacher has to cope and satisfy these constantly shifting academic loyalties in such a way that the grand sweep of America sometimes gets lost in the shuffle.

And of course, television hasn't been much help. Television really doesn't have much of a collective memory. It operates on a twenty-four hour cycle. Movement and change, not reflection and analysis, are the keys to television's success. Back in the fifties and in the sixties, there were occasional attempts to document our history on television, but that was when there were really only two networks, CBS and NBC. ABC was a weak third. These

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two networks could afford to look back once or twice a week because they had so little competition. But, with the deregulation of the industry under Carter and Reagan, with the network world no longer just CBS, NBC and ABC, there came PBS and a hundred thirty-seven cable channels, and C-Span and CNN and Ted Turner this, and Ted Turner that, and VCRs and rental movies, and everything about the networks, everything including their priorities and their values, began to change. That meant the slow erosion between the news business and show business. It meant the decline and death of such documentaries as *CBS Reports* and *NBC's White Paper*. And the shift to *Sixty Minutes* and *Forty-eight Hours* and *Prime Time Live* and *Dateline NBC* and *Twenty-Twenty*, all programs relatively inexpensive to produce, which were exciting in the hip, fast-moving, smart, upbeat, titillating style which drew big audiences, but which did not tax the viewer with anything much longer than twelve to fifteen minutes, and which totally defaulted on the network obligation to preserve in the national memory something of our history's past. The network programmers had concluded that younger viewers simply had no interest in history.

So, there was a void, an enormous void, and into it in 1990 moved Ken Burns, with his groundbreaking series on PBS, *The Civil War*, followed by *Baseball*. PBS simply was not prepared for the audience that *The Civil War* attracted. Burns had been making documentary films since 1978, but they were one hour programs on the Brooklyn Bridge, on Huey Long, on Thomas Jefferson. And they were tucked away in the back waters of the PBS Channel. But *The Civil War* was something else. Nine hours. Nine hours on prime time. The incomparable Shelby Foote, the eloquent narration of David McCullough. The fearless use of still photographs, the resourceful search for and use of diaries, letters, voices and music. For those who despaired about the future of history on television, they were simply blown away. So, there was hope. There was an audience for history on television. Maybe not on the big networks. Maybe not among all teenagers and the thirty somethings. Maybe not audiences measured in double digit millions, but an audience to be reckoned with. And now, believe it or not, history on television is a thriving business, at least on PBS and on cable. Archival film was once a federal government exclusive. The National Archives, whose holdings include the Signals Corps footage of the liberation of World War II concentration camps, and some even from World War I, is one of more than one hundred government agencies which house more than a billion—a billion—feet of archival film. But, archival film has now become the stuff of private commerce. There are almost three hundred companies in the business of licensing stock footage for serious documentary producers—for feature films, for CD-ROM encyclopedias, even for television commercials. A major part of this brand new market has been fed by the very media that once threatened historical films with obscurity. *The American Experience* on PBS, the Discovery Channel, the Learning Channel, the A&E Network and my own company, the History Channel. The History Channel began in January 1995. I was hired to host the documentaries, Sandy Vanocur to host the historical movies. We were both network fugitives, Sandy from NBC and I was mostly from CBS. In the brief life of cable television, the History Channel's success has not been equaled. The forecast for the first year in 1995 was four and a half million subscribers. That doesn't mean viewers, it means households. The History Channel finished that year with eight million. And now as 2000 draws to a close, the number is close to seventy-three million. Not that the History Channel is the answer to the whiting out of history in some of our schools but it is a start. So now I'm about finished and I must tell you that never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I'd be celebrating our forty-third wedding anniversary in Rooms 203 and 202 of the Sacramento Convention Center. But other than celebrating it with my wife, E.J., in a small villa in Italy overlooking the Mediterranean, there is no place I'd rather be than in a room full of History teachers.

Now I have a brief story that I want to tell you before I close. Having the name Mudd has made my life interesting. My mother and father got my brother and me through our early years when we first began to hear all those nicknames and slams like *mud turtle* and *mud pie*, by telling us that anybody that couldn't think of a better joke than that wasn't really worth the time of day. But nothing quite prepared me for what happened during the festivities of the second Eisenhower inauguration in 1957. For some years the descendants of Dr. Samuel Mudd, who was one of the indicted, co-conspirators in the Lincoln assassination, have been trying to get that conviction overturned believing that Andrew Johnson's pardon left his guilt in doubt. But so far, the federal government has let the verdict stand. The Dr. Mudd case has always fascinated historians, but not, I found out, more than a congressman I met soon after I began reporting in Washington. Not only fascinated was he by Dr. Mudd, but he was also fascinated by bourbon and during the 1957 inauguration parties, he somehow clamped onto me and at every stop, at the various balls and parties he would introduce me as Dr. Mudd's great-great-grandson, and at every stop he would fortify himself for the next stop. So, by the time the evening was ending, my connection to the assassination had grown more and more intimate and just as I was finally able to break away, I heard him yelling, "Charlie, c'mon over here 'n meet Roger Mudd...'is father shot Lincoln!"

With that, I tell you again of my total pleasure in being here.